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ABSTRACT

Current research shows that the skills of listening, talking, reading, and writing are learned simultaneously. Children acquire these skills from their experiences of copying adults and interacting with other children. The term "emergent literacy" refers to the combination of the four skills in literacy learning. The whole language approach supports emergent literacy by incorporating the skills into children's learning experiences. This approach can be used by teachers and by parents at home. Parents can foster children's literacy by providing them with a rich print and verbal environment at home. This may involve conversing with their children, keeping examples of writing around the home, using wordless books for storytelling, and giving children access to printed materials. The success of a school literacy program often depends on children's literacy learning at home. As a result of recent research which supports natural, rather than formal, language learning, teachers have begun to examine schools' reading readiness programs. Many traditional reading readiness tests measure skills such as auditory memory and letter recognition, which are abstracted from the reading process. Emergent literacy tests would measure such qualities as children's prior knowledge and ability to associate meaning with print. A nine-item bibliography is provided. (BC)

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Home Literacy
The Natural Way

by

Maxine Bradt, Teacher

Second Language Acquisition
Self-Contained Classroom

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Home Literacy The Natural Way

Maxine Bradt

Traditionally, it was believed that children first learned to listen and talk and later, when entering school, children learned to read and write. Current research shows that all four of these skills are actually learned simultaneously from day one. Literacy skills are acquired from experience with the environment. Adults, especially parents, help set an example for learning. Children not only learn from copying their parents* and other adults but also from interacting with other children. Each positive experience with the world that surrounds them serves as a basis for further learning. Since all experiences have some effect on a child (and an adult), the need to build on prior knowledge when entering school is very important to facilitate learning. One must not forget the significance of building a child's esteem. Good feelings about oneself lead to positive feelings toward the world and learning.

The popular term, emergent literacy, refers to the combination of the skills reading, writing, speaking, and listening in the process of learning to be literate. Each of these skills, learned simultaneously, help in learning about the other. This term was first introduced in 1966 by Marie Clay but it did not become popular until the last few years. The philosophy of emergent literacy suggests that children do learn before entering kindergarten; learning starts immediately and is continuous. A child does not just suddenly learn to read or write or talk or listen. A baby's attempt to talk, a child's pretend writing, and a child's personal narration of a story by looking at the pictures, are all literacy skills that develop in everyday life.

The approach that supports emergent literacy is the whole language approach. This approach, whether at home or in school, incorporates experiences in the four areas of learning: oral, listening, reading, and writing. It is important that children be actually involved in their own learning. When learning to speak, a child imitates those around him. When parents, or

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*The word "parents" in the paper also refers to the guardians, relatives, or friends, whom the child may be living with.

others caring for the child, give the child positive feedback about her or his attempt to speak, the child builds confidence and is motivated to try again. Similar to this, a child is more likely to have interest in reading and writing if he sees those around him read and write. it is important that parents accept the errors of a child. Acceptance and self-esteem are paramount for a child's motivation to learn.

"Parents" are natural language teachers. Yet they usually aren't even aware of their essential role in helping their children master the intricacies of speech. Furthermore, parents usually don't realize that these early language "lessons" start their babies off on the road to reading and writing." (Fields, 1989) The active experiences that parents can involve their children in cause children to create and discover their own answers. In the book, *Literacy Begins at Birth*, an active participant in learning versus passive is stressed. Many toys do all the creating for the child and she or he tends to only watch and not participate. This book suggests that parents buy toys that grow with the child like blocks, paper and markers, playdough, and real materials such as sand and water. Instead of watching a parent bake or cook, a parent can invite a child to become an active participant. When talking about an animal, or object, or place, it is better to actually experience it. These suggestions may appear to be very basic to many. The point is that active participation promotes thinking which, in turn, encourages a child to discover and experiment with the skills he or she has.

Often when there is a discussion about parents and learning, the only issue discussed is one of *what and how much* a parent reads to a child. The responsibility of creating a positive learning environment for a child goes way beyond this. As mentioned previously, emergent literacy assumes that all skills can be learned simultaneously. Therefore, a parent's concern should extend beyond reading to listening, speaking, and writing. *Literacy Begins at Birth* and *Literacy Development in the Early Years* provide other suggestions for parents to promote learning. Parents need to take the time to converse with their children and allow the child to respond. Parents should overlook the errors when a child responds and then the parent can elaborate on the

sentence or sentences spoken by the child. It is important to write in front of a child and not wait until the child is in bed or at school to partake in writing. A parent can discover a lot about a child's interests if they tune into them when reading to them. Parents can easily relate a book's content to the past experiences of the child. That's why parents are good teachers; they know, better than anyone, about the past of their own child. Parents can draw inferences from pictures; modeling a reading technique without formalizing it. The conversations during story reading are as important as the reading. Learning to ask questions when confusion arises can also be modeled during these conversations.

The article *Wordless books: An Approach to Visual Literacy* suggests that wordless books allow a child to create and extend the hands-on approach to emerging literacy. (Knudsen-Lindauer, 1988) These books tend not to be used much because many adults may feel inhibited when making up their own stories. Many teachers also believe that there is more value to the printed text. The article continues to suggest the positive contributions of wordless books: increases spoken vocabulary, may increase interest, develops a sense of story, allows predictions, promotes inferential and sequential thinking and creative expression. These books are very good for non-English speakers; they allow vocabulary development and less concern about failure when reading the text.

"We now know that the basics of reading are not the ABC's, but rather interacting with the written language." (Fields, 1989) Letters and sounds in isolation have no meaning by themselves and are more difficult to learn. Children need to think of reading as having meaning, not as making the sounds of the letters. Pre-school children need to familiarize themselves to print by experimenting, not by direct, formal instruction. This can be accomplished by having a home with books available of multiple subjects and levels and a freedom to choose what the child wants to read. Home literacy is also promoted by family members who model behavior of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Research suggests that children learn best in situations and contexts that are meaningful and functional to them. Carl Smith, in the article *Emergent Literacy-an*

environmental concept, suggests that handling books, letter recognition, simulated or scribble writing appears to be more important than working on shapes, color recognition, or hopping and skipping. (Smith, 1989) This suggests that children prepare themselves for reading and writing by acting out what they see that adults do. Kindergarten and first grade teachers can carry these theories further by making activities meaningful and believable in the classroom.

The goal is to have children view reading, writing, speaking, and listening as useful skills that all people use to learn and communicate. The activities that foster these theories may be reading to each other, tape recording a story for others to listen to, and writing notes to parents and other children. Schools should promote a natural continuation of the learning environment from the home. Children need to share ideas from their home and past through drawing, talking, and play. Strickland and Morrow in *Family Literacy and Young Children* state this idea well: "An atmosphere that is risk free and where literacy is approached for pleasure and meaning, rather than as an exercise in the acquisition of discrete skills, should prevail." (Mandel Morrow & Strickland, 1989) This article continues with some excellent suggestions for parents: make the child aware of print around them like labels, telephone books, advertisements, visit the library often, share with a child what they have seen or read, share what is done at work, have many writing materials around the home and give positive feedback when children attempt to write or draw. Some researchers believe that blank paper is better than coloring books, which can cause feelings of failure as a child attempts to color within all the lines.

Often the success of a school literacy program depends on how the child has been learning in the home. In the past, teachers would suggest that parents teach children the alphabet and the sounds of letters. These were considered by many to be the most important pre-reading skills. As a result of suggestions like these, many parents believed, and still do, that formal instruction at home is the best technique for learning. Current research on learning during the pre-school age disagrees with this advice. As mentioned previously, current research suggests a natural approach to learning in the home. This research promotes the placement of books, magazines, and

newspapers throughout the house, the availability of materials such as puppets, a tape recorder, and feltboard which help children create their own stories, and materials for writing and drawing on paper. Parents need to be aware of environmental print which can be pointed out to the child (i.e., road signs, billboards). Besides reading to a child, parents and children can tell stories to each other and discuss what they have read. To promote motivation, a parent needs to model pleasurable and useful reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities.

As a result of research on early literacy, teaches and administrators have begun to question the reading readiness programs in their schools. For many years, these programs were viewed as necessities because it was *assumed that children*, entering kindergarten, *knew nothing about literacy*, and because of this, a formal program in readiness was needed. Children were and are still tested for certain competencies in physical development, cognitive, social, and emotional development. many children are kept from progressing in literacy skills as a result of these tests. It is an unfortunate consequence to think that a child, being unable to skip or hop, or identify colors and shapes, is not offered the learning experiences as others who have mastered these isolated skills. The blame for this type of thinking can partially be placed on teacher preparation. Reading courses have a history of being separated from other language arts courses. Current research now shows that all literacy skills can be taught and learned simultaneously and that what is learned about one skill can help in the acquisition of other skills. Research has shown that children learn by watching adults model certain skills and later continue that learning process by engaging in similar activities. Through positive feedback, the child is motivated to continue this type of learning.

Holdaway (1986) explains the progression of learning to read in the following manner. Children first observe others read and being read to. Next the child collaborates with another person who helps them. The third step is practice. This may be attempted alone or under adult observation. The fourth step is when the child performs a learned behavior and looks for feedback from others. Schools should attempt to continue these processes in the classroom. When

considering the topic of evaluation, frequent individual observation, examples from a child's work, and conversation with the child suggest what the child's abilities are. When only using standardized tests, the personal insights of a child are slighted. If standardized tests have to be utilized, they should always be accompanied with other forms of evaluation. Many reading readiness tests evaluate different skills than those that would be part of the emergent literacy philosophy. Lesley Mandel Morrow explains this well when discussing the skills tested. "Those skills, abstracted from the reading process and then designated as precursors of reading, include such things as auditory memory, rhyme, letter recognition, visual matching, school language, and listening. By contrast, practices that nurture emergent literacy emphasize children's prior knowledge, book concepts, attitudes about reading, association of meaning with print, and characteristics of printed materials." (Mandel Morrow, 1989) Passing the readiness test may not mean a child is ready to read and not passing it does not necessarily mean that a child can't read. Many teachers have to give these tests according to school policy. These teachers often spend too much time teaching the skills that prepare the child for the test because they feel responsible for the test scores. When this is done, a lot of time is wasted that could be used for more meaningful activities. The results of these scores unfortunately also place children into reading groups of different levels, and they influence decisions such as if a child should enter first or second grade. The point of all this discussion about evaluation is that the parent needs to be aware of how their children are being tested. If standardized tests are used, other forms of evaluation also need to be used. Parents should not take the results of these tests as the final answer. Tests can be wrong about identifying literacy problems in a child.

Many parents are already practicing emergent literacy philosophy without realizing it. They are providing their children with a print and verbal rich environment and many do not realize that their activities are influencing all of the communication skills. Educators can also learn a lot from the research on early literacy. Home literacy can give educators an insight into how the classroom can be a continuum of the natural process of learning. Aside from the research

discussed in this paper, other related issues need to be studied further. Little is still known about what and how children learn from each other and how this effects their literacy skills. Also needed, is more research on home literacy in families with cultural differences other than mainstream white population. The natural learning that can be found in both of these examples may give educators insights into literacy learning in the school environment.

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